

Grinnell vies for spot as one of Iowa's Great Places

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The invitations came from the Great River Road along the Mississippi, the historic Amana Colonies and even the Ingersoll shopping district in Des Moines. Some were hand written from the mayors of Iowa's smallest cities, while others arrived on fancy letterhead from the state's largest economic development groups.

And one came from Grinnell.

Local leaders – and hundreds of others across the state – want the area they know and love declared one of Iowa's Great Places.

In the city's invitation, Mayor Gordon Canfield called attention to the cultural and economic importance of Grinnell College, the Grinnell Regional Medical Center and Grinnell Regional Mutual Reinsurance Co.; ongoing projects like the downtown revitalization and the Iowa Transportation Museum; and the planned enhancement of Arbor Lake and Central Park.

"The citizens of Grinnell invite the state of Iowa to become our partner in connecting multiple development projects into a dynamic network and ensuring the success of each through collaboration and synergy," he wrote.

Gov. Tom Vilsack earlier this year signed an executive order to kick-start the Great Places program. It will allow state agencies to work with three pilot sites that will be selected as Great Places.

The goal is to stimulate planning

ideas, streamline access to available state resources, allow access to technical expertise and help leverage local and private resources.

Each community will be selected by a Citizen Advisory Board, made up of members from across the state. Poweshiek Iowa Development Executive Director Bill Menner is its chair.

"This is really our first chance to expand on the governor's vision for developing and settling on what makes a 'Great Place,'" Menner said.

While the board is still developing and refining the criteria for selecting the pilot sites, he added, Vilsack has announced the seven qualities of a Great Place:

- It must offer an engaging experience that has varied opportunities for individual and community expression, interaction and common experiences.
- It must have a unique sense of place, where people value their historical roots. Both natives and newcomers are welcome.
- A Great Place has rich, diverse social fabric where social interaction – formal and informal – is encouraged.
- It has a vital, creative economy, where there is a balanced, growing, transformative mix of rewarding jobs and sustaining capital.
- There is a pleasing environment, which has clean, healthy and accessible natural and built environments

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that enhance the quality of life.

• A Great Place also contains infrastructure that is available, accessible and responsive to everyone – the entire social fabric.

• These places will also have a creative culture where citizens display a shared attitude of optimism that welcomes new ideas, based on a diverse and inclusive cultural mosaic.

Program administrator Anita Walker, who is also director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, said in a statement that 145 invitations from 91 counties came to the state in July. Menner said that of those, 74 worked with officials from a variety of state departments to make a formal presentation to Citizens Advisory Board members – which, they hope, positions them to become declared a Great Place.

The board will select the three pilot sites at an Oct. 3 meeting, and an

announcement will be made Oct. 11 about who receives the designation.

The state will then help the community find resources available through 18 state agencies, Menner said. This

might come in the form of finding funds for a specific project, providing assistance in project planning or helping promote a trail, museum or other area attraction.

One to two board members will visit Grinnell later this month and a local committee will make a one-hour presentation about what makes this a Great Place. The city competes with others in the area, such as Belle Plaine, Newton, Oskaloosa, Pella, Fairfield and Ottumwa.

One member of the local committee is Lesley Wright, a lecturer of art for Grinnell College who is director of the Faulconer Gallery.

She said that Grinnell is a great place because there's so many different initiatives going on simultaneously that

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make this a promising place to live – whether it's the addition of a gymnasium and auditorium at Grinnell High School, growth at the local hospital, businesses choosing to locate and expand here or upgrades on area bike

trails.

“We feel there needs to be a more coherent way of tying all these facets of the community together, to make it accessible to all community members and visitors,” she said.

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